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A WOMAN'S ENCHANTMENT

By William Le Queux

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(Continued.)

"He gave a false one—the name of Grindfield. But he afterward admitted he had lied to me."

"What was he like? Describe him. Tell me all, Phil," urged the big burly man in dark tweeds and soft gray hat, as he strode at my side along the facade of the Crystal Palace toward Sydenham.

"My experience to-day, my dear fellow, has been a most unusual one," I said. "The police are in active search of you."

"Yes," he groaned. "I expected as much, Phil," he said. "But you are my friend, aren't you?" he went on, hoarsely. "I know you are or you wouldn't be down here."

"I am your friend, Granny, and I'll remain so," I said. "But I think that you should be open and frank with me. Tell me, why are the police looking for you?"

"No—no, by heaven! Phil," he cried. "I—I can't tell you that. Don't ask me. Ah, old chap, you don't know the torture I'm suffering—you don't know—"

And he broke off suddenly. I saw by the uncertain light of the street lamp that his clean-shaven face bore a haunted look. His eyes were set and staring, as though he foresaw ruin and disgrace before him.

"Ah! no!" he went on, in the same hoarse tone. "For myself what do I care, even though the police find me. But I care for little Gertrude—and for Myra, my beloved. She must never know this, Phil. Promise me to keep it from her—if the worst happens!"

"The worst? What do you mean?"

"Bah! you know. I'm not afraid to die. I'm no coward."

"I know that, Granny," I said, as quietly as I could. I knew to what he referred. He intended to die by his own hand rather than suffer the indignity of arrest. That guilt was upon him was only too apparent. And yet the dead woman was certainly not Lydia Popescu!

Again I urged him to make a clean breast of the whole affair, saying: "You can surely trust me, old fellow! I am your friend."

"I know, Phil, my future is in your hands entirely. You could deliver me over to this constable coming along if you so wished. I admit that, but yet I must refuse to tell you anything."

"Take pity upon me and refrain from asking any questions. I am suffering enough."

I saw the appealing look in my friend's eyes as we left the Parade and crossed the road into that silent and eminently respectable thoroughfare, Sydenham Hill, where all the houses are large and all standing in their own grounds.

"You have promised to remain my friend, Phil," he added. "And I know you will remain so until—until my death!"

"You are too gloomy," I declared. "Cheer up, and let's put our wits together to get you safely away from here. The police by this time have probably received from the post office a copy of the telegram bearing my name. If they have there are detectives down in this neighborhood."

"How can I escape when I've no money?" he asked. "I've two and three-pence and an eighteen-shilling watch," he laughed, some of his old humor returning to him.

"I recollected that," I said. "I've brought you fifty pounds. Here they are," and I placed five ten-pound notes in his hand.

For a few moments he said nothing. He was overcome with emotion. "Phil," he managed to exclaim at last, "you're a real friend," and he gripped my hand warmly.

"That's all right," I said. "But the question is how are you going to get away?"

"You know this place better than I do. Where had I better go?"

"You mustn't attempt to get away abroad or you'll certainly be taken," I said. "My own opinion is that if you went down to some quiet spot in the country it would be safest. To return to London would be fatal."

"I've left all my kit at the Cecil," he said.

"Abandon it. That's the only course," I urged him. "I owe them a bill," he declared, for he was always most careful to discharge all his liabilities, even though he were an adventurer.

"You can send it to them by post," I suggested. "Have you seen or heard anything more of Gertrude?"

"No," he snapped quickly. "I don't want to see or hear of that thief again. He doesn't interest me any more."

"Or Lady Popescu?"

He was silent, and I watched furtively the strange expression that overspread his features. Phil," he said at last, in a low whisper, "please never mention that cursed woman's name again to me. Promise me, will you?" he asked earnestly.

"If you wish, my dear fellow," I said readily.

Then as we walked down Sydenham Hill, where there was not a single footfall in the darkness save our own, he asked me to describe in detail the stranger who had followed me to Worthing, and what had occurred between us.

"This I did, when, after hearing me in silence, he asked: 'And did not this man give you his real name?'"

"He told me to tell you that Tom Winch was here, in England, to be tray you."

"Tom Winch!" he cried. "Are you sure you've made no mistake?"

"Quite. Why?"

"Tom Winch would never betray me. He's a friend to me—as you are. There's some mistake."

"No, there's not, because Winch was the man who previously gave me his name as Grindfield."

"The man you met?"

"The same. I am sure it was he

who sent you the wire this morning. He gave you warning, although he is supposed to be assisting the police to identify you."

"Then, by Jove! he's a real brick!" cried Granny, and he handed me a cigar and took one himself.

"You did him a good turn once, and he remembers it."

"Oh, that was nothing. He was in trouble in Vienna, and I got him out of it by a bit of sharp practice. That's long ago. I thought he'd forgotten it."

"Then he's a crook—or?"

"Of course," laughed my friend. "Used to work the boats between Liverpool and New York till the game grew too warm. After that he took to handling sparklers, and he and his friends handled them to the tune of a good many thousands. They got the Duchess of Montalto's jewels from the villa at Beaulieu about eighteen months ago. You recollect the fuss. Old Jacobsen in the Kerk Straat in Amsterdam had them, and their late owner wouldn't know them now—you bet. Six of them divided up twenty-two thousand pounds over that little affair. They have a flat in the Rue Lafayette in Paris—or at least they had six months ago. I've stayed there when I've been hard up. The men are all Englishmen. One of them is Jallan, who came out of Portland two years ago, after doing a stretch for the Castleton forgery."

"A nice little company, I should fancy."

"Yes. A pretty tough crowd—all of them linguists, and all experts in their particular departments."

"Then why is Winch over here to identify you?"

"That's the confounded mystery of it. Looks as though he'd turned 'mark,' but yet I know him far too well for that. He's still a friend, or he wouldn't have sent that wire. I cleared out at once, of course, not knowing what had happened."

"And you must clear out, still further afield, Granny—and to-night."

"I'm entirely in your hands," he said, "but I beg of you to do me one favor. When we part now we—well, we might not meet again, you know. If not, promise me you will never let little Gertrude know the truth, nor Myra either. I'll die same, and I'll die honorably if you will not give me away."

"I shall never do that, Granny," I said, and again his hand sought mine and gripped it in grateful acknowledgment, as a lump arose in his throat.

We had arrived near the bottom of Sydenham Hill, where the light of Lordship Lane Station showed below us, and were deep in discussion as to whether he should go into hiding. He wished to be near London, and in touch with myself, but I dissented. I urged him to go into the heart of the country, wear gold-rimmed spectacles, and lead a quiet, studious life, which would put people off the scent. It would be a rest from the strenuous existence he led.

Suddenly, as we were in earnest conversation, my ear caught the sound of a footstep behind us and I turned sharply to catch sight of a rather tall man in a thin, dark overcoat and a hat that he was passing beneath the street lamp.

In an instant I recognized him. He had traveled from Ludgate Hill in the next compartment to mine. My heart fell.

That man had been following us ever since we met!

CHAPTER XI.

Contains Much That Is Exciting.

"Stop here a moment and give me a light," I whispered to Gough, who had not noticed that we were followed. "I want this man behind us to pass."

He brought himself up quickly, took out his matchbox and, striking a vesta, held it to my cigar. He halted so quickly that the man dogging our footsteps was bound to proceed in our direction, and so go ahead of us.

As he passed, he pretended to take no notice of us. But I recognized his face. I had seen him in the booking office at Ludgate Hill station, and again upon the platform. I noticed that he had once peered inquisitively into my face, but at that time I took no notice of the incident. The truth was, alas! too plain. The police had put a watch upon my chambers in St. Martin's lane, expecting me to go forth and meet my friend. I had therefore unwittingly betrayed him into their hands!

Granny looked sharply at the receding figure, and asked me the reason I had halted.

I raised my finger in a gesture indicative of silence. "Just where we stood the road descending to Lordship Lane station took a sudden bend before it joined Wood Vale, and around that bend the detective was compelled to go. He, of course, was in ignorance that I had recognized him."

The instant he had disappeared I gripped Granny's arm and entered the gravelled drive of the large house opposite which we had been standing. I ran over the lawn noiselessly to the rear of the premises, where I feared the presence of a dog which might give the alarm, and scarcely had the idea crossed my mind than we heard the warning bark of a large collie close to us. Fortunately, however, it was chained to its kennel, so therefore we crept forward again until we came to a boundary fence, over which we clambered, finding ourselves in another garden of still larger dimensions.

Whether we were going I knew not. To avoid the watcher I had made a sudden dash for it, believing that if we got behind the houses of Sydenham Hill we could effectually escape him.

We paused, and in breathless anxiety listened. The collie still gave tongue, but we heard nothing more, save the distant sound of a train away in the dull red glow that showed where giant London lay.

"By Jove! A close shave, Phil!" gasped my friend. "That fellow was the man who previously gave me his name as Grindfield."

"Yes, he was. He's been following me ever since I left Talbot House."

"This was a smart move of yours."

"To be continued."

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Another instant and we'd have been seen."

"He'll certainly come back, and if he does he'll hear that infernal dog and follow our tracks."

"Yes. Let's get away," he said, and we again started forward, creeping across two other gardens, and being compelled to skirt right in front of the French windows of one house where the blinds were still up, and where we could see a pretty girl in pink, seated at the piano within. A tall, fair-haired young man was turning over her music, and no second glance was needed to ascertain that they were lovers.

Granny glanced at them, and sighed. He was recollecting certain days spent with Stapletons, and how Myra used to sing to him.

Our progress was fraught with a good deal of peril, for—ordiners of coachmen might be lurking about, or even police constables, who, because of a recent burglar scare, were, I knew, in the habit of patrolling the grounds of the larger residences.

Our progress since we left the roadway had been all up-hill until, when we climbed another boundary fence, we saw, to our joy, that beyond lay the deep cutting of the Chatham and Dover railway.

As we scrambled over the fence, I heard a policeman's whistle blow in the distance.

The detective was giving the alarm. No time was to be lost, so we sped along the railway line, back toward the Crystal Palace. We had not, however, gone for more than five minutes when something unexpected confronted us—the mouth of the tunnel under Sydenham Hill.

To enter there without a light we decided was far too dangerous, for we decided was far too dangerous, for we were passing train. Therefore we scrambled up the steep embankment, and passing through somebody's garden found ourselves at last in Crescentwood road. I chanced to know my way about that locality, for when a boy I used to visit an uncle who lived in Sydenham. Indeed, had enjoyed many a boy-and-girl flirtation along those lonely suburban roads.

For a moment I reflected upon the best course to pursue, and decided to take that lane which leads down to Sydenham Hill station, on the main Chatham and Dover line. So together we walked on at a brisk pace.

"We've given that chap the slip, that's one blessing," Granny remarked, with a loud laugh. "The question is, where shall we go now?"

"The whole world is open to us," I said. "But you must go into the country—exactly where, I haven't yet made up my mind."

"If you hadn't been as smart as you were I should have gone to prison to-night!" my friend said, grimly. "But I suppose the unwelcome experience is only postponed. I shall find myself arrested in the course of a day or two," he sighed.

"Don't be a fool, Granny," I said bluntly. "A man with your wits can evade them, surely. They're mostly blunders here, you've always said."

"Of course, they are. If I had Har-ard and his men in Paris to deal with I would not have a ghost of a chance," he declared.

Arrived at the station, we found a city-bound train just due; therefore we took tickets for Ludgate Hill, and entered it, glad to slip away from the neighborhood where, no doubt, the detective had already raised the alarm.

To be continued.

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